

Editorial 7 - *The Reading Loft* – Healing from Severe Trauma with the Aid of Stories People Identify With

Reading Your Mind

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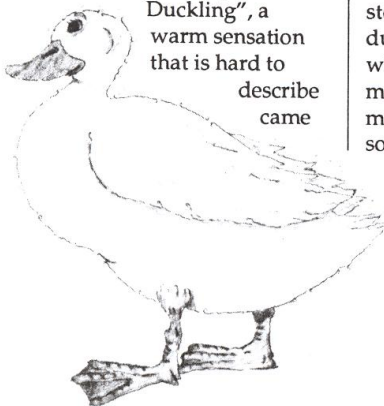
The impact of Hans Christian Andersen's tale, "The Ugly Duckling", has been profound in the lives of many of my college students. The standard pattern is that of the child who perceiving great inabilities within himself, feels there is little chance of competing with siblings or peers, either intellectually, athletically, or in physical beauty.

I have also observed themes of emotional isolation and low self-esteem, especially for children having medical problems resulting in isolation from peers. Identification with Andersen's tale can be helpful in such situations.

Experience has shown me that many individuals identifying with "The Ugly Duckling" do have a basic survival instinct. Their determination to make something of their lives and thus of themselves, is a common thread linking the various forms of self-identification.

Permission was given to share the following example of what I have been talking about. Ask yourself why the tale had such therapeutic impact in this situation. Could Andersen himself be the key? "The day I first read

"The Ugly Duckling", a warm sensation that is hard to describe came



over me. I related to the duck. And not so much because he was ugly, but because he was different. You see this was just about the time that I found out it was not normal to have an older man play with me sexually. I, too, was different. I had finally found a friend—the ugly duckling.

No one knew, but I took the book home with me. For many years this book was hidden between my mattress and box springs. It became a ritual that after abuse, I would take out and read "The Ugly Duckling". Somehow, I always felt better knowing that this duck was not only different, he had become a trusted friend. I would talk to the duckling. I would show him my emotions. I would even cry. The ugly duckling knew everything including those things I had been forbidden to tell anyone. He was my only true friend that could be trusted with the secrets of my life.

The full impact of the story did not hit me until a few years later. I was a teenager at the time. Abuse was still happening. One night after an abusive episode, I read the entire story. I thought about the ugly duckling turning into a beautiful white swan. Somehow, this gave me hope that someday that maybe I, too, might turn into something beautiful. It was then that I started reading the book for a different



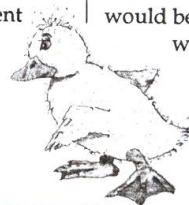
loved the ending. After I finished reading the book, I would dream about the many ways that I would become a beautiful white swan and maybe even "the prettiest swan of them all". The book gave me hope that the abuse would end and I no longer would be different.

The abuse did finally end. And, I still have the book. However, it is no longer hidden in my bed. I have it on a shelf where it is easily accessible. It is a book that I read often.

I have read many books to escape. But, I always seem to come back to "The Ugly Duckling". It gives me the hope that all my hard efforts in therapy will someday pay off. The beautiful white swan represents to me what I will become through my work. The book's moral to me is that not all terrible things turn out bad. So today, I no longer relate to the duck that is different, but to the swan that I can become."

Andersen wrote his 156 tales between 1835 and 1875. He was the son of a poor cobbler and a washerwoman.

Andersen's writings are loaded with ambivalence towards his class origin and his status within society. He was a loner and an outsider who travelled much. He believed that life was miraculous and that God protected those who were ordained to be the elect. Genius was God given and the recipient would be rewarded, no matter what class a genius was born into. Thus Andersen went against the grain. He felt God had the power and only to Him did one



have to submit oneself.

To hold such a position his society made him pay a bitter price. His ordeal was that of a borderline schizophrenic, with Andersen having a nervous disorder all his life. He became the adopted son of Jonas Collin and the adopted brother of Edward Collin.

Even though Andersen had education and genius abilities, he never-the-less had many self-doubts and appeared to be constantly having to prove himself.

Two separate letters written to Jonas and Edward show this uneasiness with himself, and with his status in Danish society.

To Joras:

"You know that my greatest vanity, or call it rather joy, consists in making you realize that I am worthy of you. All the kind of appreciation I get makes me think of you. I am truly popular, truly appreciated abroad, I am famous - alright you're smiling. But the cream of the nations fly towards me, I find myself accepted in all families, the greatest compliments are paid to me by princes and by the most gifted of men. You should see the way people in so-called High Society gather round me. Oh, no one at home thinks of this among the many who entirely ignore me and might be happy to enjoy even a drop of the homage paid to me. My writings must have greater value than the Danes will allow for... You must know, you my beloved father must understand that you did not misjudge me when you accepted me as your son, when you helped and protected me."

To Edvard:

"I'm longing for you, indeed,

at this moment I'm longing for you as if you were a lovely Calabrian girl with dark blue eyes and a glance of passionate flames. I've never had a brother, but if I had I could not have loved him the way I love you, and yet—you do not reciprocate my feelings! This affects me painfully or maybe this is in fact what binds me even more firmly to you. My soul is proud, the soul of a prince cannot be prouder. ...Oh, I wish to God that you were poor and I rich, distinguished, a nobleman. In that case I should initiate you into the mysteries, and you would appreciate me more than you do now. Oh! If there is an eternal life, as indeed there must be, then we shall truly understand and appreciate one another. Then I shall no longer be the poor person in need of kind interest and friends, then we shall be equal.

"The Ugly Duckling" is perhaps the closest representation of Andersen's own life. The "gifted" underdog survives the ordeal of the lowerclasses. Being chased by lower class animals from the henyard or bitten by other ducks, requires alternative strategies by the survivor. Before the swan recognized his true nature, he had even contemplated giving up. He said to himself, "I shall fly over to them, those royal birds! And they can hack me to death because I, who am so ugly, dare to approach them." Better to be killed by royalty than stand the misery of one's miserable circumstances.

The "Ugly Duckling" lucked out. He found himself at last.

He was a royal creature and with such nobility flowing through him he took well to the compliant rules of the royal garden.



Andersen was almost accepted into the noble class of his day, but felt he hadn't arrived. Compliance to power that was corrupt was disdainful and he let his views be known in the stinging tales of "The Emperor's New Clothes," "The Tinderbox", and "The Swineherd". "The Nightingale" is a reminder that the gifted will serve, but only a benevolent master.

I believe the power in the tale comes from Andersen's own pain and insecurities. All his life he strove to be the successful gardener ("The Gardener and his Master"), who, though insecure, continued to improve his abilities and himself.

"The Ugly Duckling" is to the injured, a model of hope for the 'ideal' self. Small wonder that identification with the tale can be so intense. Andersen might well have believed that the instinct to survive is a God given gift, and as such should have nothing hinder a person's personal growth.

The best self appears to blossom in enriching environments, but even Andersen would say everyone needs the enduring will of the duckling to get there, when the early life obstacles are adversity.